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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 1999]

GE.99-11390 (E)

1. The Society for Threatened Peoples wishes to once again draw the attention of the Commission on Human Rights to the deteriorating situation of religious freedom in Tibet. It is hoped that the submission of this statement will encourage the human rights mechanisms of the Commission to consider concrete scrutiny of the violations of religious liberties in Tibet.

2. The People's Republic of China, by adapting human rights to its national laws, degrades the significance and universality of human rights when it fails to live up to international standards of human rights. As a result there exists widespread violation in all areas of human rights in Tibet. The people of Tibet are denied their basic right to freedom of religion, and reports indicate that an escalating number of Tibetans are being arbitrarily detained for refusing to oppose their spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhism is not simply the religion of the Tibetan people. Over the centuries, Tibetan national and cultural identity became indistinguishable from religious identity, to the extent that Buddhism regulated the life of all Tibetans.

3. In recent years, a repressive policy was adopted by China in order to neutralize religious influences within the Tibetan community. From China's perspective, Tibet's strong religious traditions fuel three persistent nuisances. Firstly, Tibet's religious strength is closely linked with its defiant independence movement: underground political groups have burgeoned in Tibet's monasteries and nunneries; and Tibetan monks and nuns fill Chinese prisons, making up 68.83 per cent of Tibetan known current political prisoners. Secondly, Tibet's Buddhist religion unifies and defines the Tibetans as a distinct people; distinct in particular from China and its coercive strategies to "unite the Motherland". Thirdly, it constitutes an obstacle to China's economic "development" of the region: in November 1995, in an article in China's official newspaper, monks were attacked for "not contributing to economic growth".

4. In January 1996, the Chinese authorities warned, "(t)hose who make use of religion to interfere with administrative, judicial, martial, educational and other social affairs, especially those who take advantage of religious reasons to split the country, must be severely cracked down upon according to law". Three immediate tasks were identified in order to "clean up problems in religion" in 1996: to order all places of worship to register; to deal with difficult religious problems of public concern; and to cultivate contingents of young patriotic religious leaders. Three months later, on 28 April 1996, China's national "Strike hard" campaign was launched inside Tibet. While this campaign was to crack down on crime and corruption, in Tibet the campaign was targeted at "splittists" who supported Tibetan freedom and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

5. An integral part of "Strike hard" in Tibet was the "patriotic re-education" drive which drastically suppressed religious freedom in monasteries and nunneries and other Buddhist sites. Communist "work teams" were sent into monasteries and nunneries all over Tibet to forcefully "re-educate" monks and nuns how to think and act. Those who resisted faced expulsion or imprisonment. The core of the "re-education" sessions is to oppose notions of Tibetan nationalism and to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Those who opposed "re-education" faced severe repercussions.

6. Since China launched the "Strike hard" campaign in Tibet in April 1996, 9,827 expulsions, 318 arrests and 14 deaths have been reported as of February 1998. Regulations allowing entrance into monasteries have been tightened - for example, the imposition of minimum and maximum age restrictions - thereby further reducing the monastic population and discouraging religious studies. China reports that so far some 30,000 of Tibet's 46,000 Buddhist monks and nuns have received "patriotic re-education" and out of 1,787 monasteries and temples a reported 1,780 monasteries and temples have been covered by the work teams. The Chinese authorities have also started to extend the campaign from monasteries and nunneries into all parts of Tibetan society.

7. In November 1997, the Chinese authorities announced that "patriotic re-education" will be carried out in agricultural communities, towns, cities, government organs and schools. The announcement carried by the Tibet Daily of 21 November, signalled the "success" of a pilot project carried out by the authorities to see if the "patriotic re-education campaign" could be safely adapted to the rural communities, where the Chinese authorities were concerned that the influence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama was increasing.

8. It is not only His Holiness the Dalai Lama who is under attack by the Chinese authorities, but Tibetan Buddhism itself. In July 1997, in a radical rewriting of a history that goes back centuries, Tibet's top leader, "Tibet Autonomous Region" Party Secretary Chen Kuiyuan, declared that "Buddhism is a foreign culture" and claimed the idea that Tibetan culture is Buddhist to be "totally absurd". This was followed by the announcement in November 1997 in China's official newspaper that the ideological "re-education" campaign could continue for the next three to five years, stressing that, "(r)eligion must adapt to the development needs of socialism and not socialism adapting to the needs of religion".

9. Religious and cultural rights are internationally recognized human rights. The incorporation of these rights in international law is a recognition that the preservation of these values is of concern to the entire world community. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and thereby represents an international standard applicable to all nations. The inseparability of religion and culture in Tibetan society means that the Tibetan people's freedom of religion is also protected under article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (signed by the People's Republic of China in October 1997), which recognizes the right of everyone "(t)o take part in cultural life". China regularly claims that the Tibetan people's human rights are being observed and that they enjoy full religious freedom.

10. The brunt of China's religious repression is currently borne by Tibet's monks and nuns and, as shown in a recent report, "Closing the door - religious repression in Tibet", released by an Indian-based human rights group, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. The report concludes that the accounts compiled reveal violations of internationally recognized human rights to religious and other freedoms on the part of the People's Republic of China, which represent an immediate and critical threat to the very survival of the religious, linguistic and cultural identity of the Tibetan people.

11. The current attacks on the Tibetan freedom movement's perceived "splittist" activities and on His Holiness the Dalai Lama as a political and as a religious figure, are also central in the drive to construct what the People's Republic of China calls, "spiritual civilization". For example, in a 23 July 1996 speech, Chen Kuiyuan asserted that the Dalai Lama has betrayed the "aim of Buddhism" and said that one of Tibet's important tasks in constructing "spiritual civilization" was to "screen and eliminate the Dalai's influence in the spiritual field". Other tasks according to Chen, were correctly handling the issue of religion and establishing a "proper concept" of religion.

12. It is in view of the situation in Tibet described above that we support the wish of the Special Rapporteur to make a follow-up visit to Tibet. We, therefore, call upon the Chinese authorities to invite the Special Rapporteur as soon as possible.

13. In conclusion, we call upon the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-fifth session to initiate concrete actions against the repeated failures of the People's Republic of China in the field of human rights by adopting a resolution under the agenda item dealing with country situations.